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ABSTRACT

The plan described in this report was developed in response to language in the 1979 Budget Act that required the California Department of Education to development a comprehensive plan for addressing problems in administering the state's attendance laws and attendance accounting requirements. The current attendance accounting procedures and policies are based on the need to have attendance figures to ensure that students are in school, as required by the compulsory attendance law, and to determine a school district's average daily attendance (ADA), which is the basis for its state funding. The accounting procedure is complex; in 1979-80 a total of 18 types of ADA and enrollment accounting were recorded for the state. After examining current and alternative methods of apportioning state money, the department recommends that state funding be based on average daily membership (ADM) or, if ADA is kept as the standard, that only full-day absences be counted in determining ADA. The plan to improve student attendance includes recommendations for roles to be played by students, parents, schools, school districts, School Attendance Review Boards, and the state department of education. (Author/IBT)

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Plan to Improve Student Attendance in California Public Schools

A Report to the California Legislative Budget Committees
in Response to the Supplemental Budget Direction
of Item 307-1 of the 1979 Budget Act

CALIFORNIA STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Wilson Riles—Superintendent of Public Instruction
Sacramento, 1980

EA 013 970

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LEGAL REQUIREMENT FOR THIS REPORT

Program/Item	Recommendation	Comment
School Attendance Item 307	Approve supplemental language relative to a study of school attendance: "The Department of Education shall submit to the Legislature by November 1, 1979, a comprehensive plan for addressing problems in administering the State's attendance laws and attendance accounting requirements. This plan shall (a) include estimates of the costs (state and local) of complying with current legal requirements (including addressing the Legislative Counsel opinion regarding apportionments), (b) identify changes in present statutes which are necessary to establish effective and efficient attendance policies and attendance accounting procedures, (c) indicate the fiscal implications of any proposed changes, including the fiscal implications of providing direct assistance to School Attendance Review Boards, (d) describe strategies to assist local educational agencies in developing and implementing plans to improve school attendance and environment, and (e) identify components of a plan to reduce the effects of campus crime, vandalism and other identified factors contributing to student absenteeism."	Agreement among SDE, DOF, the Analyst, and the Auditor General.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The plan described in this report was developed in response to supplemental language to the 1979 Budget Act which stated that "the Department of Education shall submit to the legislative budget committees, by November 1, 1979, a comprehensive plan for addressing problems in administering the state's attendance laws and attendance accounting requirements."

The plan would have to:

- Include estimates of the costs (state and local) of complying with current legal requirements (including addressing the Legislative Counsel's opinion regarding apportionments).

- Identify changes in present statutes which are necessary to establish effective and efficient attendance policies and attendance accounting procedures.

- Indicate the fiscal implications of any proposed changes, including the fiscal implications of providing direct assistance to school attendance review boards.

- Describe strategies to assist local educational agencies in developing and implementing plans to improve school attendance and environment.

- Identify components of a plan to reduce the effects of campus crime, vandalism, and other identified factors contributing to student absenteeism.

The supplemental language was adopted largely in response to a fall, 1978, study by the Office of the Auditor General regarding student attendance and absenteeism in a sample of California schools. The results of the study, released in March, 1979, indicated that actual attendance levels were 90.8 percent of enrollment in elementary schools; 87.7 percent of enrollment in junior high schools; and 81.4 percent of enrollment in senior high schools. Urban senior high schools had the lowest average attendance levels, 79 percent of enrollment. Attendance on Friday averaged 78 percent in all high schools in the sample taken. Attendance declined in the afternoon at high schools, averaging 81 percent or less of enrollment in each of the afternoon periods. For such subjects as foreign languages, science, and music, the average attendance levels were highest. Low average attendance levels were found in special education classes.

The causes for absenteeism most frequently cited in the Auditor General's report included illness, dislike of or boredom with school, social adjustment problems, family or personal business, influence of friends, and academic problems. Other reasons cited for absenteeism were lack of authority to enforce attendance laws and absence of parental concern or control.

To address these issues, the Department of Education established a task force of staff members from units in the Department directly involved with attendance. This task force gathered data and input for this report by:

- Meeting with members of the California Association of Supervisors of Child Welfare and Attendance at a special meeting held during the association's annual conference

- Surveying a sample of county and local school attendance review boards around the state to obtain information about the workings of school attendance review boards (SARBs) (Members of the task force reviewed the experiences and operations of approximately 70 SARBs.)

- Meeting with staff members from the Office of the Auditor General to review the findings contained in the Auditor General's report on attendance and absenteeism and the data developed for that study

- Holding workshops to receive input on perceived attendance problems, possible causes, and recommendations for change (Three general workshops were held during July at the Office of the Santa Clara County Superintendent of Schools, the Office of the Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools, and the State Department of Education Building in Sacramento. On October 4 a workshop on attendance issues in special education was also held in Sacramento.)

- Sending survey questionnaires throughout the state (The questions were essentially the same as those posed and discussed at the workshops. See Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire used at the workshops and in the mail survey. These questionnaires also requested people to identify projects which they considered successful in addressing issues of student absenteeism.)

Chapter 2

CURRENT ATTENDANCE ACCOUNTING PROCEDURES AND POLICIES

Attendance is recorded primarily to (1) ensure that students are in school as required by the compulsory school attendance law; and (2) determine average daily attendance and thus the funding a district is entitled to, under its revenue limit, for various categorical aid programs. In addition, as federal and state special programs have been established, so have related attendance accounting and reporting requirements. Because these programs have been added for a wide variety of purposes, they have been based on funding formulas employing a number of different attendance measures. For state purposes, in 1979-80 a total of 18 types of average daily attendance and enrollment are being recorded; and numerous reports, forms, and accounting records are required.

School districts and offices of county superintendents of schools must maintain accurate, adequate records to comply with statutes and regulations governing attendance and funding. Persons responsible for these tasks must understand (1) the legal requirements governing the admission of pupils to the several types of schools and classes; and (2) the requirements governing procedures and forms for crediting, recording, computing, and reporting pupil attendance.

Attendance accounting, which is governed by numerous sections of the Education Code, is complex. Examples of the complexity of the system are the following:

1. Some attendance records are kept by grade level; others (such as records for special education, opportunity schools, adult education, continuation education, and regional occupational centers and programs) are kept by program.

2. Some attendance records require positive accounting (actual time present in clock hours or minutes); most, however, require negative accounting (recording of absences only).

3. Separate registers are required for some program areas, such as kindergarten and special education.

4. Certain reports must be submitted daily, weekly, monthly, annually, or periodically to school districts, offices of county superintendents of schools, or the state.

5. Some reports are based on enrollment; others, on attendance.

Each person in California between the ages of six and sixteen is subject to compulsory full-time education. Section 48200 of the Education Code states that "each person between the ages of six and sixteen is subject to full-time education." Education Code Section 48400 states that "all persons sixteen years of age or older and under eighteen years of age, not otherwise exempted by this chapter, shall attend upon special continuation education classes. . . ." Section 48410 of the Education Code exempts from continuation classes those students among others) between sixteen and eighteen who have been graduated from school or who are "in attendance upon a public or private full-time day school or satisfactory part-time classes maintained by other agencies."

Responsibilities of teachers, schools, school districts, offices of county superintendents of schools, and the state are also covered by various provisions of the Education Code and California Administrative Code, Title 5, Education regulations. Unless exempted under Education Code Section 44809, teachers in kindergarten and grades one through eight must record attendance in the State School Register. Exemptions to this requirement are allowed if the school district has a centralized accounting system approved by the Department of Education or contracts for regional data processing services. High school attendance must be recorded on forms approved by the Department of Education. Except for certain programs (such as continuation education), attendance data must be submitted daily by teachers to the principal. Monthly reports must also be submitted by the teacher to the principal, and no more than one week may be allowed for verification of absences. Education Code Section 44816 requires that teachers submit annual reports to the principal unless exempted by the Department of Education under certain conditions (for example, if attendance at a school is kept by a single teacher or aide). A teacher's salary for the final month of school may be withheld if he or she does not comply with this requirement.

Schools must maintain daily records, prepare required reports, and verify absences. Schools are also required by the Education Code to report to the school district superintendent or attendance supervisor students who are absent more than three days or tardy 30 minutes or more on four or more days.

School districts are required to appoint full-time supervisors of attendance (Education Code sections 48240 through 48246).[1] Small school districts may appoint part-time supervisors or may contract with another school district or office of a county superintendent of schools. Responsibilities include ensuring the accuracy of attendance procedures and verification of absences.

Offices of county superintendents of schools are required by the Education Code to employ a supervisor of attendance responsible for addressing truancy and behavioral problem referrals, participating on the school attendance review board (SARB), assisting local SARBs, and supervising attendance in direct service districts (unified, elementary school, and high school districts of less than 1,501, 901, and 301 average daily attendance, respectively).

The Department of Education is responsible for approving alternative attendance accounting systems and forms, providing various reporting forms to school districts and counties, and providing consultant services. Reports submitted to the Department of Education are used for such purposes as statistical information; calculation of entitlements; determination of class-size penalties (for kindergarten through grade three) and pupil-teacher ratios (for grades four through eight); and computation of the district's advance apportionment for the succeeding fiscal year and any increases or decreases in apportionment because of changes in average daily attendance reported. For up to three years, school districts must submit amended reports that will affect revenue by $100 or more.

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[1] Assembly Bill 1648/79 (Greene) would eliminate this requirement.

In response to the attendance problems of an individual student, it is common for school administrators or support services personnel to contact other local agencies assigned to assist students or families with serious problems. Such community resources include welfare agencies, private and public counseling services, church organizations, and community service organizations. The availability of such resources varies from community to community.

If a school district has used its resources fully to resolve a difficult student behavior or attendance problem, the school district may submit a referral to a school attendance review board (SARB) as established by the county superintendent of schools. The SARB has the choice of accepting the referral or returning it to the school district if the SARB judges that the school or district has services yet to be performed.

In many counties school districts, with the approval of the office of the county superintendent of schools, formed a school district-level SARB. (Some districts have established more than one SARB.) In such cases the referral may go to the district-level SARB rather than the county SARB. (For example, cases in Sacramento County are heard by district-level SARBs.) After the SARB has accepted a referral, the SARB may request the parent or pupil (or both) to attend a conference to discuss the problems the school has identified. The SARB may also call upon community resources to participate actively with a family or student with attendance or behavior problems. These relationships are often written into an agreement, with the parent and student identifying the resources that are to be utilized.

If the SARB feels that the progress of an agreement is unsatisfactory, it may elect to refer serious disciplinary or attendance cases or both to other legal procedures. Specifically, schools have the option, with an SARB sanction, to present a student behavioral or attendance problem to the county probation department. The probation department in turn evaluates the referral and may elect to present such matters formally to the juvenile court. Alternatively, the school district may also consider the student more a victim of circumstances than one directly responsible for his or her conduct. In such cases referrals are generally given to county welfare bureaus with responsibility for child protection. The result of such an investigation for dependent minors may be the removal of the child from his or her home. Finally, a district or city attorney may file a complaint against a parent for not complying with compulsory school laws. There is a framework of fines and penalties in existing laws if a municipal court finds a parent guilty of keeping the child out of school without proper cause.

Since the Auditor General's study, the Legislature has enacted additional statutes that affect the issues identified in the supplemental language to the budget:

1. Assembly Bill 52/79 (Chapter 236, McCarthy) defines as an excused absence a pupil's absence because of justifiable personal reasons. School districts may not claim these absences as average daily attendance for funding purposes.

2. Senate Bill 72/79 (Chapter 1206, Roberti) requires the Department of Education to request data from school districts and offices of county

superintendents of schools regarding school crime and violence. Violence in school has been identified in several studies as one cause of student absenteeism.

3. Assembly Bill 23/79 (Chapter 990, Vasconcellos) establishes a commission on crime control and violence prevention which will investigate root causes and possible means of reducing violence in society.

Chapter 3

ESTIMATE OF COSTS OF COMPLYING WITH LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

Attendance in California's schools is taken for two very different purposes. One purpose is to ensure that students are present in school as required by the compulsory attendance law and to encourage maximum attendance for education. The other purpose is to determine average daily attendance (a.d.a.) for funding.

The importance of this distinction is evidenced by the conclusion in the Auditor General's report that actual attendance usually ranges between 80 percent and 90 percent of enrollment. In contrast, a.d.a. for funding has been approximately 97 percent of enrollment in California. The primary explanation for the difference between actual and funded attendance is "excused absences." Pursuant to Education Code Section 46Q10, excused absences are absences due to (1) illness; (2) quarantine under the direction of a county or city health officer; (3) appointments for the purpose of having medical, dental, optometrical, or chiropractic services rendered; (4) attendance at the funeral services of a member of the immediate family; and (5) jury duty. Thus, many of the absences identified in the study by the Auditor General's staff are excused absences under California law and are counted for funding purposes. In addition, legislation such as Assembly Bill 52 (Chapter 236, 1979) will have the effect of increasing the number of excused absences although it will not increase the funded a.d.a.

Education Code Section 46300(a) states in part that, "in computing the average daily attendance of a school district, there shall be included only the attendance of pupils while engaged in educational activities required of such pupils and under the immediate supervision and control of an employee of the district who possessed a valid certification document. . . ." Exceptions to the supervision requirements are made for work experience, independent study, and rehabilitative schools, classes, or programs. Section 46010 specifies the circumstances under which an absence will not be deemed an absence for computing average daily attendance (e.g., illness, quarantine, medical appointment).

A State Department of Education publication states that "if a student, acting independently, departs from school before completing a full minimum day after once having been under the direct supervision of a certificated employee, such absence may be credited for full apportionment."[1] This statement clarifies Section 403 of the California Administrative Code, Title 5, Education, which states that "a pupil enrolled . . . is deemed present for the entire school day unless he is absent for the entire school day. . . ." The Department's regulations and interpretation are based on the legislative history of Chapter 513/57 (Assembly Bill 858), which initially stated that the bill was necessary so that "rules and regulations may be adopted which will require that only full-day absences will be recorded." By the time Chapter 513/57 was enacted, the initial intent statement had been replaced with an urgency clause which stated that "under existing law, teachers and employers of school districts are required to maintain attendance records for pupils that require a great amount of teacher and clerical time. Under this complex system, teacher time is taken

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[1] Attendance and Enrollment Accounting and Reporting in California Public Schools. Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1977, p. 29.

from professional services that should be rendered by the teacher. In order that teacher time be freed and be devoted to teaching, beginning with fiscal year July 1, 1957, it is necessary that this act take effect immediately." The Department of Education's Legal Office has concurred in this interpretation of Chapter 513/57.

In contrast, the Legislative Counsel has rendered an opinion (dated January 19, 1979) that the Department's interpretation and regulation constitute an illegal enlargement of the statute being implemented and that, consequently, a pupil must be present for the specified minimum day to qualify for apportionment purposes. Because few provisions currently exist for proportional or fractional apportionments for regular apportionment a.d.a., implementation of the Legislative Counsel's opinion would mean that, if a student was not present for the minimum school day (or excused pursuant to Education Code Section 46010), the school district could claim no funding for that student for that day.

During the field input workshops, it was apparent that strong and conflicting opinions existed regarding the apportionment system and its relationship to the control of absenteeism. A number of participants recommended separating apportionment recordkeeping from internal district systems to track students by changing to enrollment as a basis for apportionments. Others felt that a closer tie between dollars and students would be the most effective way of decreasing absenteeism (e.g., changing to positive attendance accounting or actual seat time).

The major alternative apportionment system options and pertinent factors and field input considerations relating to each are described as follows:

1. General considerations

   a. Many resources at the local level must be allocated on the basis of enrollment. Most costs are relatively constant, however, regardless of actual attendance, the current basis for apportionments.

   b. Absenteeism is increasing, and unexcused absences mean revenue lost to the district. Lost income affects the educational program in general and, therefore, all students adversely.

   c. School districts could be rewarded for improving attendance by being given more money than they now receive or punished for poor attendance by being given less money than they now receive.

   d. Fiscal incentives to improve attendance could be provided within the apportionment system (e.g., maintenance of the current system, change to seat time, allocations based on relationship of attendance to enrollment, and so on) or outside of the revenue limit system in the form of categorical aid.

   e. Because the California Constitution refers to a.d.a., elimination or revision of the term <u>average daily attendance</u> would require a constitutional amendment. However, the Legislature could redefine a.d.a. to change the way in which it is computed if a change is desired.

2. Current apportionment system

   a. Although cumbersome and complex, the system based on a.d.a. is already in place. Computerization has relieved some of the paperwork, and various innovative EDP systems are being used to decrease the number of staff members and the amount of time needed.

   b. The current system provides a fiscal incentive to decrease absenteeism because funding is based on students in attendance or with excused absences. The alternate view is that the current system creates an incentive for excused absences, not for actual attendance.

   c. The current system tends to discourage follow-ups on absences by means of the verification of excuses; for, if the absence were found to be unexcused, revenue would be lost. Conflicts arise between the interests of the business office on the one hand and the interests of the child welfare and attendance supervisor on the other hand.

   d. Statutory clarification would be needed to address the Legislative Counsel's opinion.

   e. Very few participants in the workshops thought that the apportionment system should continue in its current form.

3. Change to average daily membership (a.d.m.) or average daily enrollment (a.d.e.)

   a. Accounting procedures would be simplified, but overhaul of the existing processes would be necessary and would take time.

   b. Definition would be necessary (when and how enrollment would be determined, calculated, and reported).

   c. Paperwork and staff time devoted to attendance-taking and recording for apportionment purposes would be reduced.

   d. An estimated additional $180.6 million might be needed statewide for the funding of additional pupils unless revenue limits were factored accordingly. Depending on the formula used, such factoring could penalize those districts which currently maintain above-average a.d.a. rates.

   e. The true cost of education per pupil would be reflected more accurately.

   f. A fiscal incentive for reducing absenteeism would not be provided.

4. Change to actual attendance

   a. Excused absences (e.g., for illness) would probably still have to be included for funding purposes.

   b. If revenue limits were not adjusted to reflect the reduced number of students for funding purposes, school districts could be faced with a general fund revenue loss of $476 million. However, adjustments for declining enrollment and the current 102 percent revenue limit minimum increase provided in Assembly Bill 8/79 would help somewhat.

   c. Fiscal incentives are created to decrease absenteeism.

   d. Accounting for actual attendance is not closely related to the basis for allocation decisions at the local level.

5. Implementation of the Legislative Counsel's Opinion

   a. Recordkeeping for each pupil for each period of the day would be required, greatly increasing demands on staff time, the amount of paperwork, and local accounting costs in many districts.[2]

   b. A fiscal incentive to decrease absenteeism is provided.

   c. A loss of general fund revenues to districts could occur if pupils were counted absent unless present for the minimum day.

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[2]The supplemental language to the Budget Act directed the Department of Education to estimate the costs of complying with the Legislative Counsel's opinion. As has been stated, the Department does not concur with that opinion However, an estimated cost of compliance with the opinion is $17.3 million. It must be emphasized, however, that this figure is a very rough estimate and represents the estimated costs of reconciling errors in the massive paperwork that would be required to comply with the counsel's opinion. The estimate assumes a 1 percent error rate in recording absences of students by period in grades seven through twelve (that is, a student is marked absent one period when the pupil is late or actually present or is marked present when actually absent). This methodology was chosen because administrators who have tried period-by-period accounting indicate that reconciling pupils being recorded as present-absent-present in successive periods is a major workload demand. Grades seven through twelve were chosen because pupils in kindergarten through grade six generally remain in one classroom all day. With approximately 10.2 million attendance checks per day (2,045,000 pupils in grades seven through twelve times five periods per day), a 1 percent error rate would result in 102,000 errors to be checked each day. It may be assumed that about 20 percent of these errors are made under the current once-a-day attendance reporting system (i.e., more than 2 million attendance checks already are taken each day) so that the net new number of attendance checks is about 80,000. At an estimated time requirement of ten minutes to verify an attendance report that contains an error, these attendance checks would require more than 13,000 hours per day. Given an aide earning $8,000 per year for a six-hour day, the estimated cost would be $17.3 million.

The Department of Education recommends that state funding for apportionment purposes be based on average daily membership. This alternative reduces the paperwork burden placed on school districts and reflects more accurately the actual basis for the allocation of resources at the local level (enrollment). This alternative could be adopted without increasing state costs or penalizing districts with above-average a.d.a. by recalculating the revenue limit for each district so that the same total revenues for that district could be maintained. Thus, a district's new revenue limit per a.d.m., would be the district's former revenue limit per a.d.a. multiplied by the number of a.d.a. and divided by the district's a.d.m. (For example, a district with 1,000 a.d.m., 950 a.d.a., and a revenue limit per a.d.a. of $1,500 would receive a new revenue limit per a.d.m. of 950 a.d.a. X $1,500/a.d.a. = $1,425,000 ÷ 1,000 a.d.m. = $1,425/a.d.m.).

The Department believes that the apportionment based on a.d.a. provides a remote and ineffective incentive for increasing student attendance. In general, it appears that teachers, aides, and other school site staff realize little financial benefit for their class or school by increasing the a.d.a. claimed by the school district. The recommendations in Chapter 4 will identify more direct and effective means of encouraging increased attendance.

If the Legislature decides not to shift from a system based on a.d.a. to a system based on a.d.m., the Department recommends that the Education Code be amended to require clearly that only full-day absences be recorded for apportionment. This requirement of law is currently vague. The Department believes that the more strict interpretation of Legislative Counsel would do little to encourage increased attendance but would result in a substantial increase in paperwork at the school-site level.

Chapter 4

PLAN TO IMPROVE STUDENT ATTENDANCE

The public sessions identified a large number of specific concerns and recommendations regarding student attendance. In this chapter these issues are discussed in the context of the appropriate role of all participants in the student attendance system.

Parent and Student Responsibility

The student, particularly the high school student, must assume major responsibility for regular attendance. However, acceptance of this responsibility at both the elementary and high school levels requires that the student understand the importance of obtaining high-quality education. Legislation in recent years regarding proficiency standards should help encourage this understanding. Legislation requiring that school districts adopt proficiency standards (Assembly Bill 1308/76; Assembly Bill 65/77) should help students become more aware of the standards of achievement expected of them and their performance relative to those standards.

One means of increasing the emphasis on the student's responsibility is to allow schools to reduce grades or withhold credit for excessive absenteeism. This option was identified in the report of the Auditor General and by several participants in the public sessions. The Department of Education recommends, however, that this option not be adopted. The thrust of recent legislation on education in California has been to place greater emphasis on demonstrated proficiencies and to reduce reliance on seat time. The Department believes this emphasis is appropriate and that grades and credit should reflect a student's understanding of the subject matter of a course.

When attendance problems arise and cannot be resolved with the student, the school's first recourse should be to the parent, who is legally responsible for ensuring that the student is attending school regularly. Many parents are unaware when their child is absent and act responsibly when so informed by the local school. Some parents are not in a position to act immediately; others are unable, for one reason or another, to ensure the child's regular attendance. Procedures are needed which (1) ensure better communication between the school and the parent so that parents are aware of the pupil's absence; (2) increase parent awareness of the importance of regular student attendance; and (3) place upon the parent the responsibility of sharing with the school the responsibility for ensuring consistent student attendance.

The primary means of ensuring better communications between the school and the parent is increasing the school's efforts to contact the parent when a child is absent. Input from the field repeatedly stated that parents often are not aware that their child is absent from school. Current law does not require that a parent be notified when a student has been absent. State regulations require that an absence be verified as excused or unexcused within five days. The Department of Education believes that this requirement does not adequately ensure parent awareness of their child's attendance. One means of addressing this concern is to require that schools notify parents if their child has been absent for a day without an excuse or if the student leaves school without

permission during the school day. Although some school districts currently use aides to notify parents and other districts could redirect their aides towards attendance improvement, for the most part this proposal would result in new mandated costs because of increased staff time devoted to contacting parents. The estimated cost of this mandate is as much as $115.1 million.[1]

An alternative to this approach would be to require school districts to adopt student attendance policies which include a district-established policy of notifying parents of student absences. The Department recommends this alternative because it would require that local agencies adopt a means of notifying parents but would allow recognition of existing local policies for parent notification and the severity of the attendance problem in the local community.

Increased parental awareness of the importance of regular student attendance can be accomplished through a variety of means. The primary approaches are between school and parent, parent and parent, and community agency and parent. The means of improving school and parent communications should be a school district decision so that the approach adopted builds on existing school activities designed to work with parents. Thus, a requirement that school district governing boards adopt student attendance policies could include a specific requirement that boards adopt procedures for increasing parental awareness of the importance of regular student attendance.

Parent-to-parent contacts were felt by many persons to be very useful in impressing on parents the problems of absenteeism. Several mechanisms now exist in law for parents to work with their schools through school site councils (the school improvement program); parent advisory committees (bilingual education, compensatory education); and community advisory committees (special education). Programs requiring the establishment of such committees are often implemented in schools with the most severe attendance problems (specifically urban schools, schools with high concentrations of children from low-income families, and schools with special education programs). The Department of Education recommends that the statutory provisions for each of these advisory committees be revised to include parent awareness of pupil attendance as one of the areas to be addressed by the committees.

Perhaps the most difficult issue regarding the role of the parent is that of the liability of parents if they do not meet their responsibilities to ensure regular attendance of their child. Both the Auditor General's report and public input to the Department of Education expressed the concern that schools and other local agencies charged with enforcing attendance requirements have little power in dealing with truancy and related absenteeism problems. For example, Assembly Bill 3121 (Chapter 1071/76) decriminalized status offenses, including

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[1] Per the sample of the Auditor General, attendance would be 90.75 percent in the elementary schools, 87.74 percent in the junior high schools, and 81.44 percent in the senior high schools. On the basis of the fall, 1978, enrollment by grade spans, 518,110.6 students would be absent. Figuring ten minutes per student to call and record (86,351.8 hours) and six hours for each aide (14,392 aides) at a cost of $8,000 per aide, the total cost would be $115,136,000.

truancy, and removed juvenile hall detention as an allowable punishment for students habitually skipping classes. (In contrast, Senate Bill 70 (Chapter 127/79) increased parents' liability for acts of vandalism by their children.)

Current law provides that a parent failing to comply with the compulsory attendance requirements of the Education Code may be fined as much as $250 by a municipal court. The Department of Education does not believe that increasing this penalty would help reduce absenteeism. However, the Department received considerable input that the existing penalties are not being enforced because of the low priority of status offenders in the juvenile justice system. Thus, the Department recommends that the penalties applicable to parents not be increased but that the judicial system for levying such penalties must be made more effective. Specific recommendations are made further on in this chapter under "The Role of School Attendance Review Boards."

The Role of the School

The school is the key interactor with the pupil in the attendance system. It is the role of the school to keep attendance, verify absences, and maintain most communications with the parent and pupil. With few exceptions attendance issues should be resolved at the school level.

Unfortunately, current law provides virtually no incentives at the school site level to promote greater attention to problems of student absenteeism. Indeed, several people giving input suggested that incentives at the school level work against seeking to improve attendance. To understand the factors involved in this incentive system fully, it is important to emphasize the difference between enrollment, average daily attendance for funding purposes, and actual in-class attendance.

Most districts budget staff and materials for the school site level on the basis of enrollment. This is the case because staff and materials must be provided for all students, even though some of those students may frequently be absent. Thus, school staffing and material budgets are largely independent of actual attendance.

Funding for the district is generally based on a.d.a. for funding purposes (roughly equivalent to actual in-class attendance plus excused absences). As was indicated earlier, most actual absences are "excused" under the law. As long as most absences are excused and may be counted for funding purposes, a.d.a. will be fairly close to enrollment. As a result, relatively little incentive exists for the school district to encourage improved attendance or to verify that absences claimed as excused actually meet the established criteria.

Because of the lack of incentives, some persons expressed support of special funding for school attendance improvement efforts at the school site level. Alternatives described included the following:

1. Create an incentive by allowing the school site to keep part of the increased revenue generated by increasing a.d.a. This measure would have the advantage of creating a direct fiscal incentive at the school level. The opportunity to increase a.d.a. is limited for most schools, however, because a.d.a. is usually close to enrollment. Nonetheless, this proposal could be a major incentive for some schools which have a major shortfall from enrollment to a.d.a. This proposal would also substantially increase the amount of paperwork needed to calculate funding.

2. Allow schools with the biggest gap between enrollment and actual attendance (i.e., those with the greatest needs in terms of attendance) to receive categorical aid based on the size of that gap, the aid to be used for school site attendance improvement. Unfortunately, this mechanism would also suggest that schools lose funds as they reduce the gap between attendance and enrollment.

3. Provide a salary bonus for teachers who maintain attendance in their classes at a level above a standard established by the state or district.

4. Require each school to develop a school site attendance improvement plan and each school district to combine site plans into a district plan. Requiring school site and district plans would result in a new mandated cost and would necessitate an additional state appropriation.

Although each of these proposals has merit, each also has at least one major flaw. Therefore, the Department believes that substantial improvement in attendance can be accomplished by requiring that school districts adopt policies for notifying parents that their children are absent, strengthening the relationship of existing school-based categorical programs to issues of student attendance, and increasing the support systems for school attendance review boards. As to the role of the school, the Department recommends that state law regarding the school improvement program (SIP) and economic impact aid (EIA) be amended to encourage that school site plans developed pursuant to these programs address issues of student attendance.

A portion of the schools receiving SIP funding and many of the schools receiving EIA funding have been identified as the most disadvantaged. Such schools generally have above-average attendance problems. Thus, the use of the SIP and EIA programs will in many instances address the correct population of schools. In addition, SIP and EIA require parental involvement, which is also necessary to address issues of student attendance effectively. Finally, any effort to improve student attendance on a permanent basis must seek to improve the school's environment and educational program. Use of SIP will place student attendance within this broader and more appropriate effort to improve the school.

Despite these advantages it must be recognized that (1) EIA is targeted on the disadvantaged population within the school and thus may not be used for schoolwide attendance improvement efforts (unless 75 percent or more of the school's enrollment is eligible for EIA, in which case a schoolwide program is allowed); and (2) both SIP and EIA have been implemented on only a limited basis in junior high schools and senior high schools. It is important, therefore, that this recommendation be viewed as part of a broader effort, including improved notification of parents and improved mechanisms for addressing individual student attendance problems.

The Role of the School District

The Department of Education recommends that school boards be required to adopt an attendance improvement policy based on the input of parents, students, teachers, administrators, other staff members, and members of community organizations. The policy should recognize the varying needs of the schools within the district.

Although each policy should be developed to meet the needs of the student population and particular characteristics of each school in the district, consideration should be given to the inclusion of policies for notification of parents if a student is absent; periodic public disclosure of absenteeism rates; auditing and accountability procedures; in-service training for certificated and classified personnel; alternative programs (including reentry programs to help habitual truants adjust to the educational environment); and policies regarding comprehensive guidance and counseling services.

For an improvement in attendance, it is necessary for all of those involved in the educational process, including parents and students, to be aware of the school and district policies regarding attendance. Further, attendance improvement must have priority, and school boards, administrators, and staff members must have a strong commitment to implement the plan and carry out the policies adopted to decrease absenteeism.

The Role of School Attendance Review Boards

The School Attendance Review Board (SARB) concept was enacted with the passage of Senate Bill 1742 (Rodda) in 1974. The establishment of the SARB was deemed necessary as an alternate means of managing school attendance and disciplinary problems. At the time serious unresolved habitual truancy cases continued to be referred to the juvenile justice system if the SARB indicated all community options had been fully explored. In September, 1976, the enactment of Assembly Bill 3121 (Dixon) functionally redesigned the judicial process for the juvenile status offender. This change in legislation required a separate nonsecure setting for status offenders which most counties in California cannot provide. Therefore, SARBs have functioned throughout the state on the premise that referrals for status offenders into the juvenile justice system are not acted upon and that most of the responsibility for resolving truancy or serious school attendance problems lies with the SARBs or the school district.

Input from the field generally concurred that SARBs serve a useful function and should continue as the multidisciplinary agency established by Senate Bill 1742. However, funding for SARBs was frequently mentioned. It has been recently established that SARBs generate costs for necessary clerical and professional staff services mandated under Senate Bill 90/77. The total amount of county claims statewide has not yet been ascertained; however, SARB costs are generated in three general areas:

1. Functional casework expenses. Such expenses would include secretarial, staff follow-up, mileage, and miscellaneous meeting expenses. Los Angeles County, for example, averaged 33 cents per a.d.a. in 1978-79 to serve this function.

2. Professional service requirements for SARB. Costs for the services of educators, probation workers, welfare workers, and other providers of mandated professional services in school districts and offices of county superintendents of schools are estimated to be about one dollar per student per school year.

3. State-level costs. Within the Department of Education, at least one funded position is needed to serve and coordinate SARB functions. This staff person could also help increase interagency agreement at the state level to facilitate the coordination of services to youths at the local level. The cost of establishing this position is estimated to be $45,000.

The appropriate costs of operating SARBs are under review by the State Board of Control. The Department of Education is working with the Department of Finance and several local educational agencies in supplying necessary data to the Board of Control. The Department of Education supports the Board of Control claim and the concept of funding SARBs. The Department recommends, however, that specific legislative proposals regarding this topic be held pending resolution of the Board of Control claims.

Although SARBs are currently written into law as having nonjudicial responsibility, a situation has been created since the passage of Assembly Bill 3121 which has shifted much of the responsibility for the management of status offenses to SARBs without appropriate authority to enforce compulsory school attendance. This situation has frustrated SARB units throughout the state. If SARBs are to be a community agency held responsible for upholding compulsory schooling, then SARBs need authority or backup support to enforce state-adopted standards. Therefore, the Department recommends that authority be established for specialized court personnel to deal with status offenders. A judicial office capable of handling a large volume of cases, similar to that which now processes traffic citations, should expedite status offense referrals from SARBs. A more visible and active court procedure to back up SARBs is fundamental if SARBs are to function as an effective community resource.

The Role of the State Department of Education

The role of the State Department of Education should include dissemination of information on innovative programs for decreasing absenteeism and efficient accounting systems and procedures geared to the widely varying needs of individual districts.[2] Through clearly stated policies and guidelines and consistent communications with the field on required accounting procedures--as well as follow-up on audit exceptions related to local attendance accounting practices--the Department can further assist school districts and offices of county superintendents of schools understand and comply with statutes and regulations.

Actual monitoring by the Department of each school district's attendance accounting system and policies is impossible without increased staff. However, the Department can greatly assist districts and offices of county superintendents of schools in such ways as establishing a clearinghouse of information on innovative programs and various systems; coordinating and assisting in in-service training on attendance accounting requirements and promising practices throughout the state; updating the attendance manual and including a clear delineation of accounting requirements under special programs; and continuing to review attendance forms and reporting requirements to eliminate unnecessary duplication and paperwork.

The Department intends to work through the Assembly Bill 551 resource centers, professional development program improvement centers (PDPICs), and offices of county superintendents of schools to encourage all school districts to include attendance improvement strategies and attendance policies in their staff development programs. Parents, students, staff members, and school boards should be aware of the importance of attendance, required procedures, and district policies as well as individual responsibilities.

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[2] As part of its survey of pupil attendance issues, the Department asked respondents to identify programs for improving student attendance that the respondents thought were exemplary. A listing of those programs can be found in Appendix E.

A call for adequate training and awareness of procedures and policies for all staff members was one of the highest priority recommendations made by the workshop participants. Staff attitude toward and lack of awareness of the unique needs of different students and particular populations of students were cited as contributing to absenteeism.

As a means of providing state leadership on issues relating to student absenteeism, the State Board of Education and the Department of Education will establish as a high priority the improvement of school attendance. The priority the State Board assigns should be high enough to encourage the use of Title IV-C funds for attendance improvement projects proposed by school districts.

Finally, the Department of Education recommends that the Department of Finance "Standards and Procedures for Audits of California Local Educational Agencies" be expanded in the area of attendance auditing. Local auditors should be required to ascertain whether school districts have Department of Education approval for their current attendance accounting systems. Pursuant to Chapter 936/77 (Senate Bill 787), audits must be conducted pursuant to the standards developed by the Department of Finance. (Previously the standards were guidelines - not requirements.) As to attendance accounting these standards are relatively silent and refer only to the testing of attendance reports and other reports submitted as bases for special purpose apportionments and allowances. No direction is provided for reviewing processes or procedures. A statement should be included in the annual audit as to whether districts have complied with regulations in the implementation of their systems (including verification of absences, consistent recording of absences, and accurate adjustment of registers) and whether district attendance improvement policies have been adopted. Also in response to Senate Bill 787/77, the Department of Education has considerably increased its efforts to follow up on audit exceptions identified through the annual audit requirement. The Department of Education will continue its increased efforts to follow up on audit exceptions noted for noncompliance with attendance accounting regulations and statutes.

Appendix A

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENT TASK FORCE QUESTIONNAIRE

Workshop Discussion

Please review and answer the following items to be discussed and turn in at the workshop:

1. Attendance Accounting Procedures/Attendance Policies

   a. What are the major problems associated with attendance accounting procedures?

   b. What procedures have you found to be effective in improving attendance accounting requirements? What other procedures do you think would be effective?

   c. What changes in statutes or regulations would be helpful in clarifying or improving attendance accounting requirements?

   d. What services from the state or office of a county superintendent of schools (or both) would aid school districts in improving attendance accounting procedures?

   e. What are the number and types of professionals and others in your school district or office of a county superintendent of schools involved in attendance roles in reviewing absences, contacting families, counseling truants, and so on?

   f. What are the necessary components of an effective attendance policy?

   g. What changes in statutes or regulations would be helpful in developing and implementing an effective attendance policy?

   h. What are the major problems related to enforcement of the attendance laws?

   i. What services from the state or office of a county superintendent of schools (or both) would aid school districts in improving attendance policies?

2. SARB

a. What agencies' participation and cooperation are necessary for an effective SARB?

b. What should an SARB's primary role(s) be?

c. What would an ideal SARB look like and how would it function?

d. What changes in statutes or regulations would improve the effectiveness of an SARB?

e. What financial resources would improve the effectiveness and functioning of SARBs?

f. Should there be a state-level body associated with SARBs? If so, what should its role be, how should it function, and what agencies should participate?

3. Attendance Improvement

a. What are the causes of student absenteeism?

b. What strategies, materials, and programs have you found to be effective in increasing attendance (immediate and long-range; direct and indirect)? What other means do you think would be effective?

c. What should the roles of students, parents, teachers, administrators, attendance supervisors, guidance specialists, community groups, and others (such as paraprofessionals or community aides) be in attempting to improve attendance?

d. What strategies or programs have you found to be effective in increasing attendance for particular populations of students (immediate and long-range)? What other strategies or programs do you think would be effective?

e. What services from the state or office of a county superintendent of schools (or both) would help school districts improve attendance?

f. What changes in statutes or regulations would improve attendance?

Comments:

Appendix B

ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS IDENTIFIED BY RESPONDENTS AS EXEMPLARY

Appendix B contains only a sampling of programs implemented by California school districts to improve attendance. The programs have been identified as exemplary by the districts themselves.

1. Colton Joint Unified School District. Unpublished descriptions of attendance improvement programs (1976, 1978): "Involvement with Attendance--Elementary Schools,"; "An Effective Attendance and Accounting System,"; and "Student Attendance Profile."

2. East Side Union High School District (Yerba Buena High School). Yerba Buena High School Project, described in "Discipline and Control Update," School Administrator (March, 1976);"Yerba Buena Things: A Lifesaver," San Jose Mercury News, December 18, 1976; and "The Yerba Buena Crisis Counseling Project," by Gerald Mullens, Phi Delta Kappan (January, 1976).

3. Fresno Unified School District. Publication of Teacher Advisement Program Resource Handbook (1978).

4. Glendale Unified School District. Unpublished description of an attendance intervention program (1978). In 1977-78, using CETA funds, the school district reduced unexcused absences by 28 percent, increased student-teacher contact days by more than 10,000, and added more than $73,000 in state apportionment funds to district income.

5. Hayward Unified School District. Unpublished report of CETA Stay in School Project, prepared by the Division of Instructional Support Services, Child Welfare, and Attendance (1977). The project employed five child welfare and attendance CETA interns, who took part in 2,735 home visits and 1,340 on-site conferences during the 1977-78 school year.

6. Los Angeles Unified School District. Exemplary programs are listed in It Worked for Us: Ideas for Creating a Positive Climate, published by the district. The publication contains the statements of goals and short descriptions of 80 programs, many of which address school absenteeism, discipline, and improvement of the school environment.

7. Morongo Unified School District. Unpublished description of a program called Hi-Desert Juvenile Intervention Program, said to be a no nonsense approach to solving student attendance problems.

8. Napa Valley Unified School District. An experiment implemented in 1975 to reduce unnecessary school absences. During the first year, absenteeism was reduced approximately 50 percent. Reference: ERIC number 119-353 (1978).

9. Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District. A study described in "Contingency Management as a Means of Reducing School Truancy," by B. David Brooks (reprinted from Education, Vol. 95, No. 3). The study employed contingency management as a technique for reducing truancy for 20 high school students. Truancy was reduced from an average of 22.3 days to 7.1 days.

10. Oakland Unified School District. Article entitled "School's War on Class Cutting," The Post, February 1, 1978. Article describes the VISTA (Visual Instant Scanning Total Accountability) system created at Bret Harte Junior High School--a tracking system for period-by-period attendance accounting.

11. Pajaro Valley Unified School District. Project H.O.L.D. (Help Overcome Learner Dropouts). The ESEA, Title IV-C project, employing peer counselors and individual learning objectives, coordinated parent and teacher information and commitment. Community agencies were used to provide direct services to students at school or in coordination with the school program.

12. Rowland Unified School District. Questionnaires for both nonattending students and school attendees (1979).

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